

# On the Very Idea of a “Political” Work of Art\*

DIARMUID COSTELLO  
Philosophy, University of Warwick

## I. “POLITICAL ART” AND/OR “POLITICAL ARTISTS”

ART can be “political” in a variety of ways. Mobilizing these differences offers correspondingly many ways for artists producing “political art” to understand themselves, and the activity in which they are engaged. To demonstrate this, I focus on a particular work of art (*The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001), by a particular contemporary artist (Jeremy Deller), seeking to locate it within this broader possibility space. The work consists in a re-enactment, as art, of a notoriously bloody confrontation that took place between police and picketing miners during the 1984–5 National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) strike.

Deller has said of an earlier work, *Acid Brass* (1999), comprising the rearrangement for brass band of various acid house anthems from the 1980s: “It was a political work but not, I hope, in a hectoring way. To be called a ‘political artist’ is, for me, a kiss of death, as it suggests a fixed or dogmatic position like that of a politician.” Of *The Battle of Orgreave*, he remarked in the same interview:

I went to a number of historical re-enactments, and they mostly seemed drained of the political and social narratives behind the original events ... I wanted instead to work with re-enactors on a *wholly political* re-enactment of a battle ... one that had taken place within living memory, that would be re-staged in the place it had happened, involving many of the people who had been there the first time round.<sup>1</sup>

\*An early draft of this article was given at the Art and Politics symposium, held in conjunction with Jeremy Deller’s exhibition *English Magic* at Margate Contemporary (Nov. 2014). More recent versions were given at the Philosophy and Contemporary Art symposium at the British Society of Aesthetics Annual Conference, St Anne’s College, Oxford (Sept. 2018), the Political Philosophy Research Group Seminar, LSE (Oct. 2018), and the Centre for Research in Philosophy, Literature and the Arts, Warwick (Nov. 2018). I would like to thank my audiences and fellow speakers on these occasions, and the editor and referees of this journal for their constructive feedback.

<sup>1</sup>“In conversation: Jeremy Deller and Matthew Higgs,” Jeremy Deller, *Joy in People* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2012), pp. 189, 190, respectively (my italics). Though ostensibly quite different, both respond to the destruction of working-class culture and traditions during the Thatcher years.

In what follows, I aim to show that these seemingly contradictory attitudes towards the value of political art, and whether (and if so how) his own art should be considered “political,” can be rendered consistent by distinguishing carefully between a variety of ways in which art may be political, and locating Deller’s work within this wider space.

Before proceeding, there is one worry I want to lay to rest at the outset, and doing so should clarify the debts that I do and do not mean to take on in what follows. Deller talks about a wholly political *re-enactment*, not a wholly political *work of art*. These need not come to the same thing; there are re-enactments that are not works of art (most re-enactments); and there are works of art that are not re-enactments (most works of art). So what justification could I have for running them together so casually here? The reason is straightforward: while re-enactments in particular will have many features that works of art in general do not share—notably re-enactment itself—qua art, they must nonetheless partake of whatever is generally true of works of art. The latter is not a topic I offer any view on here. Even so, the following problem then arises: what if it were to turn out that it is precisely those features that distinguish re-enactments in particular from works of art in general that make *The Battle of Orgreave* so interesting as political art? Indeed, I believe this to be true.

Were I trying to frame a general theory of political art this would be a serious problem, but I am not: my claims are restricted to what makes this work (as I shall say) “strongly political.” While this has implications for the general conditions that have to be fulfilled for a work to count as such, how these are fulfilled in a particular case will have everything to do with the nature of the work in question; what renders *The Battle of Orgreave* strongly political may, but need not, generalize to what renders art in general strongly political, if and when it is. Rather than offering a general theory as to what makes art strongly (or weakly) political, I want to bring out what is significant, politically, about this particular work of art. Proceeding in this way is part of a methodological project I call “philosophical criticism,” which proposes a new way of doing substantive aesthetics that departs from dominant models in recent philosophy of art.<sup>2</sup>

My strategy is to reach a kind of reflective equilibrium between the (maximally general) ways in which works of art can, in principle, be considered political, and the (highly specific) ways in which *The Battle of Orgreave* is in fact political—given the specific social, economic, and political circumstances to

<sup>2</sup>Defending this approach, which offers an alternative model to the default methodological assumptions of contemporary analytic and continental aesthetics is the burden of my current monograph in progress, *Engaging with Contemporary Art Philosophically: A Methodological Proposal*. What I call “philosophical criticism” takes its cue from certain aspects of Stanley Cavell’s early work, notably the essays collected in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Unlike analytic philosophy of art, it refrains from making claims that generalize, but at the cost of being too thin to illuminate about why particular works of art might matter; unlike continental philosophy of art, it refrains from assuming the thick normative commitments of particular philosophical outlooks as the price to be paid for getting substantive claims about individual works or practices off the ground.

which it responds. On the assumption that my more abstract remarks succeed in characterizing the available conceptual space, at least in broad outline, my hope is to illuminate not only what is original about *The Battle of Orgreave*—relative to this broader possibility space—but, thereby, the source of its exemplarity as a political work of art. Understanding the relation between the maximally abstract and the maximally concrete is necessary to bring this out.

## II. “THE BATTLE OF ORGREAVE”

What has come to be known, colloquially, as “The Battle of Orgreave” took place in South Yorkshire on 18 June 1984, during the 1984–5 NUM Strike. Orgreave, a small suburban village east of Sheffield, was the site of a coking plant that British Steel used to power its mills in Scunthorpe. During the strike, the NUM had an informal arrangement with British Steel, known as a “dispensation,” that it would supply just enough coal to keep the mills ticking over—to prevent damage to the furnaces should they be forced to shut down entirely—but not enough to produce steel. British Steel broke this agreement unilaterally, when it starting running additional coke, in defiance of the strike, from Orgreave. The NUM responded with mass picketing in an attempt to prevent trucks getting in and out of the coking plant, and the resulting conflict became a flashpoint that took on a strategic and symbolic importance far in excess of the material significance of the coke produced by this particular site. Symbolically, it spoke to the miners’ capacity to retain control over their own production; strategically, it spoke to their ability to mobilize other sectors of the industrial working class to come out in solidarity with the striking miners.<sup>3</sup>

It is estimated that as many as 15,000 people were caught up in the historical event, which involved more than 8,000 police and 6,000 miners, and resembled territorial warfare more than an industrial dispute. Deller titled the book of source material and documentation that he published to accompany the re-enactment of the events of 18 June 1984 *The English Civil War: Part II*. Like a Civil War, it split communities, pitching striking miners against working miners, and local miners against local police. The day culminated in a mounted police charge intended to disperse the miners from a confined field that compelled hundreds to flee over a parapet and down a steep railway embankment onto a live railway line: 70 miners were hospitalized as a result, and a total of 95 were arrested on charges of riot, unlawful assembly, or affray.<sup>4</sup> All 95 were later acquitted due to “unreliable” (which is to say, fabricated) police evidence. South Yorkshire Police were eventually forced to pay out £425,000 in compensation for assault, wrongful arrest, unlawful

<sup>3</sup>Some commentators on the left believe that “the Orgreave” was cooked up to deflect mass picketing from the working pits in Nottinghamshire, and thereby ensnare Scargill. See Paul Routledge, *Scargill: The Unauthorized Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 155–6; and John Anderson, *Principled Policing: Protecting the Public with Integrity* (Hook: Waterside Press, 1998), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup>Leon Brittan, then Home Secretary, stated publicly that any miner found guilty of riot should be given the maximum prison sentence, which at the time was life.

detention, and malicious prosecution in an out of court settlement, thereby avoiding any formal admission of liability or guilt.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the battle itself, this payout went largely unreported in the mainstream media.<sup>6</sup>

The confrontation itself was a massive show of state force, employing tactics previously reserved for non-domestic colonial use, tweaked in light of the recent Brixton and Toxteth riots.<sup>7</sup> It has since emerged that many of the police used on the day were “Met” (that is, Metropolitan or Greater London Police) officers, specifically trained up for the purpose, and it has been alleged that the army was deployed in unnumbered, non-identifiable police uniforms—under strict instruction not to arrest anyone as they would be unable to do so legally.

As this suggests, the stakes were extremely high, both politically and ideologically. The senior Labour politician and one-time leadership candidate, Tony Benn, described it a civil war launched by Margaret Thatcher against sectors of the industrial working class. Thatcher herself saw defeating the unions as a prerequisite to liberalizing the British economy, branding the miners fighting pit closures as “the enemy within,” a phrase lifted directly from Enoch Powell’s hugely divisive “Rivers of Blood” speech about post-war immigration. Setting aside the racist implications of invoking Powell at all, regarded as off-limits even by mainstream Conservatives, many miners or their immediate families had seen active service in the armed forces as recently as the 1982 Falklands War. Those who had, unsurprisingly, bitterly resented being described as the “enemy within.” In addition to its political significance, then, it was a hugely acrimonious dispute.

The amount of disinformation in circulation at the time is still shocking: the BBC, supposed bastion of impartial broadcasting, was found to have edited evening news footage in such a way as to portray the miners as rioters, launching an unprovoked attack on the police with missiles, to which the police responded with a horse charge to disperse them. The raw, unedited footage clearly shows the true order of events to have been the reverse: a largely unprovoked mounted police charge caused a riot.<sup>8</sup>

Commentators on the left have long believed that the stakes were perceived to be so high politically because various Conservative ministers had experienced

<sup>5</sup>South Yorkshire Police Force’s instruction to its officers *not* to document arrests in their pocket-books, in contravention of standard police procedure, so as to facilitate coordination of police statements after the fact, was the subject of an episode of the BBC’s *Inside Out: Yorkshire and Lincolnshire*, aired on BBC1, 22 Oct. 2012. See David Conn, “The scandal of Orgreave,” *Guardian*, 18 May 2017.

<sup>6</sup>This is the same force, under the same commanding officer, that was later responsible for both the 1989 Hillsborough Disaster—in which 96 supporters of Liverpool FC died as a direct result of poor policing—and the extensive cover-up that followed.

<sup>7</sup>CS gas was first used against a civilian population in mainland Britain during the 1981 Toxteth Riots; the then Deputy Chief Constable of Merseyside Police responsible, Peter Wright, was Chief Constable of South Yorkshire Police during both Orgreave and Hillsborough.

<sup>8</sup>The BBC finally acknowledged this in July 1991, but claimed it was a mistake made under the pressure of events, an explanation widely regarded as incredible. BBC news journalists at the time were reportedly furious at being told to reverse the footage. See Len Masterman “The Battle of Orgreave,” Len Masterman (ed.), *Television Mythologies: Stars, Shows and Sign* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 90–9; and Paul Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 56ff.

first-hand the consequences of Edward Heath’s failure to face down the 1972 miners’ strike, when Arthur Scargill (then an obscure Barnsley union official) had successfully used mass picketing to close the Saltley coal depot.<sup>9</sup> Failure to defeat the 1972 strike is widely regarded as a significant factor in bringing down Heath’s government, with the outbreak of a second NUM strike in 1974. As a result, many Conservatives, not least Thatcher herself, believed they could not afford to lose another confrontation with the NUM, and were prepared to do whatever it took, including stockpiling coal and (allegedly) deploying the army in unnumbered police uniforms, to defeat it.<sup>10</sup> Under Scargill, the NUM was regarded as the vanguard of militant trade unionism, such that defeating the miners would go a long way to breaking the resolve of the unions. And so it proved.

### III. THE BATTLE OF ORGREAVE

So much for the motivations of the principal players in the original events: what about Deller’s own? Deller grew up in a staunchly Church of England household in suburban Kent. Prima facie, Orgreave looks like a bit of a stretch for an Art History graduate of the Courtauld Institute and Sussex University, and alumnus of Dulwich College—but Deller is not your typical public school boy.<sup>11</sup> Deller’s re-enactment took place 17 years after the event, when he won a competition for a prestigious Artangel commission. Explaining his rationale for restaging the event, Deller recalls the experience of watching the conflict on the evening news when he was still at school:

I remember watching it on TV when I was 17 or 18 and it made an impression on me there, seeing the horses going through, all those iconic images of riots ... it was a moment of realisation for me looking at that, just thinking: well there is something seriously wrong with this country if this is what we have to do to people.<sup>12</sup>

Since restaging it, he has remarked on how excited many people in the affected communities were by the proposed project, because no one had talked about the events since. A kind of collective repression had overtaken a key event in British industrial relations, even on the left of mainstream British politics, in part because were anything similar to have happened in 2000–1 (when Deller was

<sup>9</sup>In 1972 more than 15,000 pickets overwhelmed local police, leading to the closure of the coke depot at Saltley Gate, Birmingham, on public safety grounds. Nine days later Edward Heath’s government capitulated to the NUM’s demands.

<sup>10</sup>For an account of the lengths to which Thatcher’s government was prepared to go to defeat the miners, along the lines envisaged in the “Ridley Plan,” authored by the right-wing Conservative MP Nicholas Ridley in 1977, see Seumas Milne, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War against the Miners*, 4th edn (London: Verso Books, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>In April 2008, Deller gave a keynote address to the Association of Art Historians’ annual conference, in which he traced his fascination with activating viewers—citing *The Battle of Orgreave* specifically—to the activation of the surrounding space in Italian baroque painting; <<https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/association-art-historians-annual-conference-jeremy-deller>>.

<sup>12</sup>Deller interviewed in Mike Figgis, *The Battle of Orgreave*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ncrWxnLjg> at 2.35–2.56>.

working on his re-enactment) the Tony Blair government of the day would likely have reacted similarly. Yet the outcomes of defeating the NUM strike are hard to overstate: at the national level, it transformed British industrial relations, paving the way for Thatcher's liberalization of the British economy; at the local level, it devastated northern working communities in a way that the mainstream media, dominated to this day by products of Britain's socially exclusive public schools, arguably still have little real sense of, nor genuine interest in. But the idea that Deller wanted to offer some kind of "restorative" or "therapeutic" service for the affected communities is one that he has always flatly rejected:

I was not so much trying to recuperate the recent past as dig up a festering body and give it a proper post-mortem ... I was not interested in healing the wounds of the strike, as some commentators have subsequently speculated; rather I wanted to re-open the wounds if anything, and the miners who participated in the re-enactment knew this, as it was always a part of our discussions.<sup>13</sup>

The sheer scale of the resulting work bears remarking: Deller's restaging involved some 1,000 participants, including 800 members of over 20 different re-enactment societies, including the specialist English Civil War Society and the Sealed Knot, all reporting to a single "Re-enactment Director," Howard Giles, a re-enactment specialist and pioneer of "living history" at English Heritage for over 15 years.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the re-enactors, some 200 participants from the original events were recruited through local advertising, mainly miners, but also a few policemen and paramedics. Some even cross-dressed; with miners appearing as police and vice versa. Deller's use of re-enactment societies was undoubtedly pragmatic, but it was also highly strategic: by employing re-enactment societies, Deller situated the event within a lineage of notable battles in British history, the stock-in-trade of such societies. The title of his accompanying book, *The English Civil War: Part II*, makes this intention plain, as does the perhaps less obvious fact that the work was realized by bringing together demographics with polarized political sympathies. Bringing these individuals and organizations together, and working out the logistics of staging such an event, required the participation of a major arts commissioning body, and 18 months of preparation, including over 30 site visits.<sup>15</sup>

More than its physical scale, however, it is the *artistic* ambition of the work that is most impressive. Mike Figgis's eponymous film, documenting both its making and the re-enactment itself, was first broadcast in the UK on Channel 4

<sup>13</sup>Deller and Higgs, "In conversation," p. 190.

<sup>14</sup>On the politics of re-enactment as art, see Robert Blackson "Once more with feeling: reenactment in contemporary art and culture," *Art Journal*, 66 (2007), 28–40; and Katie Kitamura "Recreating chaos: Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*," Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering (eds), *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 39–49. On Deller's interest in "living history" specifically, see Alice Correia, "Interpreting Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*," *Visual Culture in Britain*, 7 (2006), 93–112, at pp. 102–3; and John Slyce, "Jeremy Deller: fables of the reconstruction," *Flash Art International*, 36, 228 (2003), p. 76.

<sup>15</sup>In addition to the re-enactment itself, the project engendered a book, an audio CD, an archive, and the Channel 4 film directed by Mike Figgis.

on 20 October 2002. I can still recall being amazed that a contemporary artist had not only the ambition, but also the moral and political seriousness, to tackle an event of this magnitude *as art*—given the market-driven triviality of so much of what passed for contemporary “young British Art” at the time.<sup>16</sup> Delivering on the claim that art could still be an appropriate vehicle to address a topic of such significance in recent political history would already be enough to make the work (what I shall call) “weakly” political art of the highest order: roughly, art that addresses a topic of political significance and is thereby political at the level of its subject-matter or thematic content. But the fact that it does so by enlisting the help of various collaborators, including participants in the original events, and then dealing with the significant additional organizational and ethical complexity that this throws up, is what makes the work “wholly political” in Deller’s terms, and “strongly” political in mine. That is, political *through and through*—down to its internal “principles of construction.” To show this, I now want to survey some of the most general ways in which art might, in principle, be considered political.

#### IV. POLITICAL ART: THE VERY IDEA

##### A. ART IS AS *SUCH* POLITICAL

Start with arguably the most general claim that might be made for the political significance of art, namely, that the very *activity* of making art is political. How so? Well, perhaps the refusal to be a productive member of society, where this is taken to involve conceiving of oneself as a well-oiled cog in the social institution of making a living through salaried labour, is political. So understood, making art might centrally involve the refusal of a certain kind of instrumental means–end rationality—“It’s a shit job, but, hey, it pays the rent”—as the only, let alone the best, way of understanding a productive life. So conceived, the implied counter-conception of what it is to live a flourishing life, consisting of doing something for its own sake, irrespective of likely financial reward, is itself political.

Unfortunately, the view that art *as such* is political provokes more questions than it answers. On the one hand, if the very activity of making art is political, then what distinguishes making art from engaging in political activity more obviously (protesting, lobbying or campaigning, forming political parties, contesting

<sup>16</sup>For a critical overview of the “yBA” generation, see Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, rev. and expanded edn (London: Verso, 2006). That said, Deller was not alone in making work with serious political ambitions in the British context. Notable contemporaneous works include Michael Landy’s *Break Down* (2001) and Mark Wallinger’s *State Britain* (2007). For the former, also underwritten by an Artangel commission, Landy systematically destroyed all of his exhaustively inventoried possessions over a 14-day period with the aid of 12 assistants in C&A’s recently closed Oxford Street store. In the latter, Wallinger meticulously reconstructed Brian Haw’s ramshackle 2001–6 protest camp against Britain’s Iraq sanctions. This was removed from Parliament Square under the 2005 Serious Organized Crime and Police Act and reinstalled by Wallinger, on the line marking the edge of the 1-mile exclusion zone thereby created, in Tate Britain’s Duveen Galleries. Whether either counts as strongly political in my sense of bringing its content to bear, reflexively, on its principles of construction, and if so how, would require a careful case-by-case analysis.



elections, and the like)? On the other, if art is intrinsically political, how should we make sense of the evident differences between art that is *manifestly* political, in terms of its subject-matter, and art that certainly appears apolitical? In what follows, I am going to focus on the latter question.

#### B. ALL ART IS POLITICAL, BUT SOME ART IS *EXPLICITLY* AND OTHER ART *IMPLICITLY* SO

What, if all art is political, distinguishes between art that clearly addresses a theme of political interest or adopts a political stance towards some issue, and art that seems to do no such thing? Perhaps what we need is a distinction between work that is *explicitly* political and work that is only *implicitly* so. This would be to concede that all art is political, at least in some sense, but not that all art need wear either its politics, or indeed its political nature, on its sleeve. *Prima facie*, this does not seem like an outrageous concession to make to the “art as such” is political view.

But, one might ask: why accept that all art is political in the first place? Indeed, if *all* art is (either explicitly or implicitly) political, can it be political in a sense that does not generalize to all social relations and cultural activities? Once one understands the political this broadly, it ceases to distinguish between some activities and others, thereby ceasing to mean anything determinate. This renders the designation “political art” tautologous, since it effectively reduces to art full stop. For reasons of this kind, it may be better to give up on the thought that all art is political, after all.

#### C. THERE IS *POLITICAL* ART, *APOLITICAL* ART AND *NON-POLITICAL* ART

So consider an alternative way of carving the field. Perhaps what I have been calling “explicitly political” art just is political art, and what I have been calling “implicitly political” art is not political at all. Perhaps there is instead *political* art, *apolitical* art and *non-political* art, where this distinguishes between art that recognizes itself as political, art that is indifferent to this description, and art that actively rejects being understood in these terms. In that case only some art would be genuinely political, and what appears to make the most obvious difference is the work’s content.

But why accept that we sort between the political and the non-political solely by examining the content of various works of art? This is to assume not only that whether or not a work of art is political is *manifest*, but also that this will hold *irrespective* of context. Were that true, whether or not a work of art “is political” would be akin to whether or not it is made with certain materials, say, “is paint on canvas.” Both claims are true of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, for example, and both can be confirmed by examining the work directly. Moreover, if either is true today, it will remain true tomorrow. This is, at least implicitly, to conceive what



determines whether or not a work is political as an empirical feature of the work that is open to inspection and taken to hold in isolation.

#### D. “BEING POLITICAL” IS A TWO-TERM OR RELATIONAL PREDICATE

This may be to look for what it is that makes a work political in the wrong place. Perhaps what makes a work political is not some feature *internal* to the work itself but, rather, a feature of its *relation* to a background context or condition that obtains independently of the work. This would be to conceive the predicate “— is political” differently to (one place) predicates such as “— is rectangular,” “— is monochrome,” or “— is made of canvas.” It is to conceive it as a two-term rather than a one-term relation. As a two-term relation, determining whether or not such a predicate obtains will depend on factors other than just the work (and the meaning of the predicates applied to it). If so, the question cannot be resolved simply by examining the work itself. Call this a “relational” property.

If this is true, a work may be political in some contexts but not others or, at least, a work may be perceived as political in some contexts but not others, or as having quite a different political value or meaning in one context than in another. Painting the portrait of a particular individual—living or dead—or making a work commemorating a certain event, for example, might be completely conformist or banal in one context, yet highly provocative in another, and so on.

#### E. WHEN IS ART POLITICAL? VERSUS WHAT IS POLITICAL ART?

If this is right, the question needs to be reformulated. Perhaps we should ask not “*What* is political art?” but “*When* (or perhaps even *Where*) is art political?”. And answering it would require considering not only the work itself, but the historical and social circumstances in which it was made, the context for which it was intended, and the circumstances in which it is actually received. And something like this assumption does seem to be implicit in our everyday notion of political art, for the reasons just given. We recognize, without self-conscious reflection, that carrying a placard depicting the portrait of a particular individual, perhaps a dissident, may be extremely dangerous in some contexts, yet entirely on message in others.<sup>17</sup> It is worth making this feature of our everyday folk notion of political art explicit, since it makes clear that simply scrutinizing the work, no matter how closely, will not—indeed *cannot*—settle the matter; since whether or not a work is political is not a fact about the work itself taken in isolation.

While I am sympathetic to this proposal, note that, even if true, it cannot be the whole story. For it does not yet provide an answer capable of sorting between

<sup>17</sup>For much of Ai Weiwei’s 81-day police detention in 2001 in Beijing, Tate Modern London displayed the legend “RELEASE AI WEIWEI” in large capitals along the exterior of its uppermost floor. Anodyne in the UK context, such a legend could not have been displayed in mainland China, for obvious reasons.

works of art *relative to the same context*, just as the “all art is political” view failed to do. Both views are unsatisfactory to the extent that neither speaks to our sense that certain works make a manifestly political claim, relative to a given socio-historical context (such as here and now), while other works do not.

#### F. STRONG AND WEAK POLITICAL ART

I have now considered and rejected two ways to go here: the implicitly versus explicitly political art route, and the political versus non-political art route. What they have in common is that both appeal to the work’s content, conceived non-relationally. I am going to try out a different response. Could it be instead that some works are “strongly” political, while other works are only “weakly” so? Note that this cannot be the distinction between “explicitly” and “implicitly” political art (as understood by those who think all art is political) rebadged, since explicitly political art will turn out to be only weakly political on this account, while implicitly political art will not count as political at all.

Note that what has not figured in the dialectic at all as yet is any consideration of the work’s form. Could it be that whether or not a work of art is political, and if so how, is best addressed by examining the work’s form, or at least not solely in terms of its content alone? In that case it would pertain not (or at least not solely) to what the work is *about*, but also to *how* it is realized—or what I shall term the work’s “principles of construction.” Roughly, the form a work takes on in virtue of how it comes into being. One of the main merits of the relational considerations just rehearsed may be to direct our attention in this way to just such questions of genesis.<sup>18</sup>

#### V. SOME CLARIFICATIONS

A few clarifications may be in order before unpacking the distinction between weakly and strongly political art, as I understand this, in greater detail. First, I want to remain neutral, for present purposes, on the issue of whether making art is, as such, a political activity and, if so, in what sense. While this may be true in *some* sense of the term “political,” it could only be in a sense other than the one I have in mind here. So set this to one side. Second, although I will not argue for this claim here, I believe there are examples of both “strongly” and

<sup>18</sup>In turning to questions of genesis, such as the way in which a work brings its content to bear, reflexively, on its principles of construction, the view defended here has points of convergence with Walter Benjamin’s account of the relation between “political tendency” and “literary quality.” According to Benjamin, having progressive political content is insufficient if the work in question does not bring that content to bear on its organizing form and relations of production. See Walter Benjamin, “The author as producer,” *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931–34*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 768–82, at p. 777. Consistent with my earlier remarks about methodology in the philosophy of art, however, the view defended here does not entail taking on board the substantial normative commitments underlying Benjamin’s account as the price of mobilizing such insights. This runs directly counter to the dominant reception of thinkers like Benjamin in art theory. Compare, for example, Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

"weakly" political art, as I understand these terms, in Deller's oeuvre and, to my mind, they tend to line up with whether his work is good or bad as art. But the salient point here is that this is not because I have any theoretical investment in art being strongly political; I neither believe that art *should* be political, nor that it should be strongly so, if and when it is. Rather, it is a strictly critical judgement.

When Deller's art is strongly political, it tends to play to his exceptional gifts and idiosyncratic skills as an artist; when it is weakly so it tends to foreground his equally profound weaknesses. Deller seems to be aware of this himself, remarking of *Acid Brass*:

[It] changed everything for me. It was the first time I had worked on a project with a group of people ... *Acid Brass* made clear to me that I did not actually have to make things by myself any more—that I could collaborate with people instead, which was a relief as my technical abilities were always limited.<sup>19</sup>

Or, as he has expressed it more pithily elsewhere: "when you don't have technical skills, you have to survive on your wits."<sup>20</sup> For reasons of this kind—though not only for reasons of this kind—Deller is at his best when his practice animates diverse groups, by bringing together unusual combinations of people (such as ex-miners and amateur re-enactors here) to work on collaborative projects that are not only distinctly odd, but that often provoke questions as to whether the activity in question should even be considered art.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, "weak" and "strong" as I use these terms here are descriptive rather than normative. No evaluation is intended and none should be assumed: a work is not better as art simply by virtue of being strongly rather than weakly political, though it will certainly be different; not least, it will have additional layers of complexity. In so far as its complexity is a virtue, and it is not always, this may make it better. But being good or bad as art, and being strongly or weakly political, are in principle independent: a work can be weakly political and great as art, or strongly political and meretricious as art. Examples are numerous.

## VI. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF STRONG AND WEAK POLITICAL ART

Here is a rough and ready distinction between strongly and weakly political art:

A work is *weakly* political in so far as it has political subject-matter, but takes the conventional form of art for granted in the realization of that subject-matter. A work is *strongly* political, by contrast, if it not only has a political subject-matter, but subjects the principles of construction underlying its own form to political critique.

<sup>19</sup>Deller and Higgs, "In conversation," p. 188.

<sup>20</sup>Deller cited in Ralph Rugoff, "Middle class hero," Deller, *Joy in People*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup>Deller's remark about re-opening wounds cited earlier continues: "Where the 'art' is situated in projects like these is everywhere and nowhere"; Deller and Higgs, "In conversation," p. 189.

As it stands, this is not especially informative. Beyond grounding the difference between strong and weak in something like the form/content or construction/material distinction, one sheds little light on what it means for something to be political by appealing to an unexamined notion of political subject-matter or critique. But something is needed here, because if one removes the circularity one gets:

A work is *weakly* political in so far as it has — subject-matter, but takes the conventional form of art for granted in the realization of that subject-matter. A work is *strongly* political, by contrast, if it not only has a — subject-matter, but subjects the principles of construction underlying its form to — critique.

The account is no longer circular, but it is still uninformative—indeed much more profoundly so. What’s more, it lets in far too much. What kind of subject-matter? What kind of critique? Any work with subject-matter—at least arguably, any work at all—would count as weakly political so construed, forcing us back into the “all art is political” view rejected at the outset. But would we really want to say that Edouard Manet’s *Moss Roses in a Vases* (1882) or Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin’s *Basket of Strawberries* (c.1761) are even weakly political? Similarly, any work that challenges conventional artistic form in any way would count as strongly political so construed. But do we really want to say that Pollock’s *Number One* (1948) or Richard Serra’s *Throwing Lead* (1971) are strongly political, despite possessing no political content in the everyday sense?

Pause to reconsider the original formulation:

A work is *weakly* political in so far as it has political subject-matter, but takes the conventional form of art for granted in the realization of that subject-matter. A work is *strongly* political, by contrast, if it not only has a political subject-matter, but subjects the principles of construction underlying its own form to political critique.

Clearly, this does not say what it is that *makes* something a political work of art. But nor does it aspire to: I am not trying to answer that question here. Because I am not trying to provide a theory of the political, or of what makes art political, my proposal is intended to be neutral on both the intension and the extension of the concept of the “political.” If it succeeds in this, one should in principle be able to plug in one’s preferred theory of the political at this point. That said, my proposal regarding *The Battle of Orgreave* not only draws attention to, but will also trade upon, the different scope the idea of politics can take on, depending on how permissively or restrictively political relations are conceived.

Most narrowly or restrictively conceived, “politics” concerns the use of formal state mechanisms to exert coercive authority over its own citizens. The role of the police (and army) at Orgreave was political in this sense, and Deller clearly recognizes this fact: “*The Battle of Orgreave* is a political work without a doubt ... It’s about the state and the power of the state. And also, the lengths the state

will go to in order to see its aims through.”<sup>22</sup> At the level of its subject-matter, then, Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* is political in the strict sense; it documents the sanctioned use of state violence.

Less strictly or more permissively conceived, “politics” can be taken to include an ever-wider sphere of activities, such as lobbying by various non-governmental bodies, industries, and agencies. At its most permissive, it can be taken to include any exercise of power by an individual or group in more or less any familial, domestic, or workplace setting. The horror of departmental politics springs to mind. So understood, domestic violence would count—perhaps even paradigmatically—as political.

Note that on this more informal or permissive conception of politics, Deller’s relation with his collaborators also counts as political, albeit in a less strict sense than the work’s content. There is what one might call a “politics of collaboration” at stake in the work. Rather than treating his collaborators as mere hands, paid to execute his will remotely, Deller engages with his collaborators at some length. In doing so, he grants them considerable responsibility for the final form the work takes on, and relinquishes at least part of his authorial control in the process. This point is widely acknowledged by commentators. In “Jeremy Deller’s *Political Imaginary*,” without doubt one of the most insightful accounts of Deller’s politics, Stuart Hall notes that, despite not making protest art, or even being especially political in the conventional sense of the term, Deller is first and foremost an “animator” of others, and this is a political fact about his practice.<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, Claire Bishop takes *The Battle of Orgreave* to be an exemplary case of “participatory art,” that is, art in which people are the primary material mobilized by the artist.<sup>24</sup> If either is right—and I believe both are—then *how* Deller relates to his collaborators will prove crucial.

This brings me to the relation between the two conditions that strongly political art needs to fulfil on my account: that it not only have political content, but that it also embody that content at the level of the work’s form, by subjecting the principles of construction underwriting its own form to political critique. Are these two independent requirements, or does the *way in which* a work subjects its principles of construction to critique need to leverage its own content in some way? More specifically, does a strongly political work need to bring its political content to bear, internally, on the construction of its artistic form? If it does, the resulting unity of form and content would be the locus of its real political significance as art, since it would be achieved through its internal construction as a work.

<sup>22</sup>Deller, cited in Dave Beech, “The uses of authority,” *Untitled*, 25 (summer 2001), 10–12 at p.10.

<sup>23</sup>Stuart Hall, “Jeremy Deller’s *Political Imaginary*,” Deller, *Joy in People*, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup>Claire Bishop, “The social turn: collaboration and its discontents,” *Artforum*, 44 (Feb. 2006), 178–83; Claire Bishop, “The social turn,” Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 18–26, 30–7.

## VII. THE BATTLE OF ORGREAVE AS A “STRONGLY POLITICAL” WORK OF ART

Recall my opening citations: with *The Battle of Orgreave* Deller set out to make a “wholly political” work, in this case a re-enactment, while eschewing the label “political artist.” The thought I want to try out is this: being a “political artist” in the sense that Deller *refuses* is to make weakly political art: it is to make political art as this is typically understood, that is, the kind of work that claims not merely to know, but also to speak the truth about, this or that political event or topic. It is to make art that aspires to convert or convince. For want of a better term, call this “activist art.” Though one of the first things to come to mind at the mention of “political art,” merely having political subject-matter has been taken by some of the more interesting critics on the left, such as Dave Beech, as *depoliticizing*, in so far as it is obliged to take established conceptions of art’s nature on trust—if only because interrogating the nature of art is not where its real motivation lies.<sup>25</sup> When art is political in this sense of the term, it is as *external* commentary on a separate domain of the political, and not in how it relates self-reflexively to its own nature. It is in this sense, I believe, that Deller refuses the epithet “political artist” as, quote, “the kiss of death.”

If to make strongly political work is, by contrast, to subject the work’s principles of construction to self-reflexive scrutiny, two questions immediately arise: how does *The Battle of Orgreave* subject its principles of construction to critique, and is this something it does *in addition* to having a political content, or does its being political depend upon bringing that content to bear, reflexively, upon its own principles of construction in some way? Take these in turn.

In *The Battle of Orgreave*, the first involves Deller’s refusal to adopt the position of the activist artist who claims to tell his or her audience the truth about politics. He does this in large part through surrendering control over the work’s realization. Because Deller’s collaborators are not mere executors of his will, his works could not be realized without their technical expertise and creative input. One can understand this as subjecting the power relations inherent in the work’s principles of construction—the means through which it comes into being—to a political scrutiny of sorts. It is in this sense that the work is “wholly political,” that is, political in a way it animates its construction from the inside.

But what about the second question: does this have any internal relation to the work’s subject-matter, the state’s use of coercive force against a subset of its own citizens? Though perhaps not as obvious, I believe it does. The way in which Deller engages with his collaborators embodies, at the level of the work’s principles of construction, its subject-matter. In terms of the varying, more or less strict scope that the idea of “the political” may take on, my suggestion is that the

<sup>25</sup>See Dave Beech, “‘The reign of the workers and peasants will never end’: politics and politicization, art and the politics of political art,” *Third Text*, 16 (2002), 387–8.

way in which Deller animates his collaborators *informally* embodies, at the level of the work’s construction, its *formal* political content. If this is correct, then the two conditions that I claim strongly political art must fulfil are indeed internally related.

Before continuing, I want to stress the limits of this claim: only the work’s content is political in the strict sense, pertaining to the state’s use of coercive force against a subset of its own citizens. The work’s principles of construction, by contrast, are political in a more permissive sense, pertaining to the power relations implicit in working life and our everyday dealings with others. Though clearly not the same, these senses are nonetheless related here: the agency that Deller grants his collaborators, as co-creators of the work, is precisely the kind of agency that the British state refused to grant its workers as participants in a shared conversation about the country’s industrial future. In delegating responsibility for the work’s realization in this way, Deller accepts—indeed *has* to accept—that the outcome may not be what he wants; and this is a risk that neither the British state nor a weakly political artist would be prepared to run.<sup>26</sup> The former is hardly unexpected, but the latter may be less self-evident until pointed out.

To see just how deep this willingness runs, and the substantial risks it entails, take Deller’s delegation of authority to Howard Giles, his Re-Enactment Director, as a test case. Deller granted Giles full creative control of the re-enactment script. Scrutinizing the police transcripts and logs and the surveillance footage of the original events with a crime-scene investigator’s forensic eye for timeline and detail, Giles came to realize, very late in the day, that the true order of events departed from that represented in the official media record. Had he not come to this realization himself, however, this would not have made it into the script for the re-enactment. Pause to consider just how significant an element of the work this is—not least for its ostensible politics—for Deller to be willing to relinquish control of it. Here is what Deller has to say about this:

At a late stage, Howard (Giles) the re-enactment expert, realised that the police had in fact provoked a riot through their actions and this made it into the script. He realised this as a result of studying police surveillance footage and following the transcript of police manoeuvres and orders. ... Even though it may have gone against his instincts, both natural and political, he changed the script accordingly, which was a relief for me as it had come from the evidence rather than my persuasions. All this happened about a week or so before the re-enactment itself, so right up to the wire.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Some critics on the left have been scathing about it for this reason, including Dave Beech in his initial review of the work for *Art Monthly*, 248 (July–Aug. 2001), 37–9.

<sup>27</sup>“Jeremy Deller interviewed by David Alan Mellor,” *Photoworks*, 17 (Nov. 2011), p. 16, <<https://photoworks.org.uk/jeremy-deller-interviewed-by-david-alan-mellor/>>. Deller’s willingness to grant Giles the final word on the script puts pressure on Claire Bishop’s description of the work as “directed reality” and a “highly authored situation”; “The social turn,” pp. 182–3; *Artificial Hells*, pp. 32–3.



What should one make of Deller's willingness to cede control of something so fundamental? One might see it as a sign of a certain lack of political seriousness. I grant that this is a live possibility—indeed one that someone with a competing conception of what is valuable in political art might find damning. For it could be that Deller simply got lucky with Giles and, had he not, he would have faced an invidious choice between either preserving the work's political content or sharing responsibility for realizing its form with others. At that point, the two conditions on strongly political art would have pulled in opposite directions, such that the work could only fulfil one at the cost of failing to fulfil the other: *either* it could preserve its political stance at the cost of sacrificing the politics of collaboration that makes it strongly political; *or* it could retain the latter at the cost of seeing its apparent politics inverted.

It is hard to imagine a political artist in the sense that Deller refuses being willing to run such a risk. But taking the refusal of such a risk as the final arbiter of a work's political seriousness would be to defer to the activist's sense of what is required to be political, when I take this to be precisely what Deller's working method is intended to put pressure on. Indeed, I believe the fact that Deller is willing to delegate authority for decisions of such magnitude to his collaborators tells us something significant about what he takes himself to be up to; it suggests that the delegation of authority *is itself* a large part of the meaning of his practice, and of what it might mean to make political art for Deller.

Stuart Hall is right that Deller is first and foremost an “animator” or “stager” of others. This should be understood as broadly as possible, to include not only people, but also their artefacts and characteristic practices. Deller's most basic *material*, though not his medium, with which one often finds it confused in the literature, is “the folk.” By contrast, Deller's *media*—the characteristic ways in which he holds up the folk and their practices for the appreciation of others—are highly diverse. Deller animates the folk with considerable love: his first mid-career retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, London (2012) was titled “Joy in People.” His work is strikingly egalitarian: it is shot through with ideas about the polis and its people—which in a British context makes class unavoidable—and, unlike high art more generally, it does not despise the folk, the vernacular, or the popular.<sup>28</sup> In the last analysis, Deller's role as an animator, instigator, provocateur, or stager of others and their practices is more central, both to what he is about and to what makes his work political, than promulgating a particular political line of his own.

At bottom, Deller is perhaps best seen as some kind of idiosyncratic artistic producer-cum-impresario, in some ways perhaps even a throwback to 19th-century vaudeville. He brings together strange combinations or rosters of people

<sup>28</sup>Compare “Folk Archive,” his collaboration with Alan Kane documenting various British folk art practices, <<http://www.jeremydeller.org/FolkArchive/FolkArchive.php>>. See also Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK* (London: Bookworks, 2008).

in such a way as to generate odd reactions. Take the working-class miners and middle-class re-enactors brought together here: given the latter's fascination with Empire, notably the decisive battles of English history, battles waged for much of that history by its kings and queens, re-enactors tend towards the Conservative end of the political spectrum. Conversely, the NUM was on the left even of the more radical trade union movement of its day. Deller reports that many re-enactors were openly terrified of engaging the miners, whom their natural political sympathies cast as militant thugs, even in mock battle. The odd situations Deller sets in train cause such groups to spark off one another in unpredictable ways that are finally under neither his own nor his participants' or collaborators' control. His willingness to cede control of his work's realization to what emerges from such situations is the real locus of its politics.

By engaging sympathetically with a range of non-artworld collaborators, Deller arguably does more than merely grant them a significant role in how the work turns out, though this is already to do something significant; he offers them new experiences. The miners' excitement about the re-enactment and the degree to which it affected some of them is palpable in the Mike Figgis documentary. In it, several miners speak movingly about the effects not only of the strike, but of this particular day of the strike, on their own, their immediate families', and their communities' subsequent fortunes. By affording his participant-collaborators this unexpected space for reflection, and even celebration, of an event that mainstream British society has been all too ready to leave behind, along with their livelihoods and communities, the work may, if only negatively or indirectly, grant them a glimpse of alternative possible worlds.<sup>29</sup> It can do this, I believe, only because it is open not only in spirit and conception, but also in execution.<sup>30</sup> This is what makes the work political in the deepest sense.

### VIII. A METHODOLOGICAL OBJECTION CONSIDERED

Given how heavily the foregoing depends on affording a space for reflection for those who participated in the work's creation, or were directly implicated in the events portrayed, a question naturally arises as to whether the resulting work is strongly political *only* for these, more or less local, constituencies. This is to ask how broad the target audience for such a work can be: is it primarily those who

<sup>29</sup>In October 2016, the then Home Secretary Amber Rudd rejected calls for an inquiry into policing at Orgreave, and as recently as March 2019, Sajid Javid did the same. See Alan Travis, "Government rules out Orgreave inquiry," *Guardian*, 31 Oct. 2016; and Frances Perraudin, "Battle of Orgreave: Home Office rejects independent review," *Guardian*, 4 Mar. 2019.

<sup>30</sup>This comes out most clearly in *It Is What It Is*, but is central to Deller's work more generally. Consisting of the burnt-out shell of a car destroyed by a bomb detonated in a Bagdad book market on 5 March 2007, killing 38 and wounding hundreds, *It Is What It Is* was used as a spur to conversation in Deller's exhibition of the same name at the New Museum, New York, before being toured around US cities in the company of Jonathan Harvey, a US Army reservist, who had seen active service in Iraq, and Esam Pasha, an Iraqi artist recently granted asylum in the US. Parked up in public squares and plazas across the country, the car was used to initiate open-ended conversation about the Iraq War. See Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is* (New York: Creative Time, 2010).

either participated in its construction or were touched by the original events, or is it these plus those members of the local community who witnessed its restaging? Or is it, much more generously, the international artworld audience for Deller's art and socially engaged art practices more generally? How one responds to this has significant implications. Should the work fail to address the latter, this might be thought to imply that the work is intended solely for its first-order participant audience, and its being strongly political is merely an artefact of its idiosyncratic nature as collaborative performance.

This objection is worth taking seriously. If it goes through, the scope of the resulting account will be extremely limited, in terms of the kinds of work to which it could in principle be applied. Recall my earlier acknowledgement that whereas Deller himself talks of wanting to make a wholly political *re-enactment*, I talk throughout about making a wholly political *work of art*, despite these not being co-extensive. Granted, Deller makes his wholly political re-enactment *as art*, such that whatever is true of art in general must also be true of *The Battle of Orgreave* in particular—on pain of the latter's failing to be art. But what if it is precisely those features associated with participative re-enactment, that it does not share with art at large, that makes it exemplary as *political art*? Will this not immediately limit the scope of any claims that can be raised off its back? This is less a worry about the claims I make about Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* itself than a worry about the possibility of their generalization.

While I cannot fully adjudicate such a methodological challenge here, note the following: in so far as "philosophical criticism" of the kind practised here aspires to give *individual* works of art the kind of sustained attention that standard approaches in the philosophy of art rarely afford, this might be thought to beg the question. For it is less an internal criticism of my argument than an external rejection of my project. As such, it reduces to an appeal to business as usual, when it is precisely the limitations of business as usual that my way of proceeding is intended to bring out. From the perspective of the philosophical critic, what makes one work strongly political can—but need not—be what makes another work strongly political. This will depend on the nature of the works in question, so can only be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

To show this, I want to close by contrasting what I have said about Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* to two works by other artists that involve no collaboration (though one involves participants), but which nonetheless come out as strongly political on my account. The first is *Insertions in Ideological Systems I: Coca-Cola Project* (1970) by the first-generation Brazilian conceptual artist Cildo Meireles. It is (by far) the more successful of a pair of such projects, the other being *Insertions in Ideological Systems II: Bank Note Project* (1970). Both involve adding subversive political messages, such as "Yankees Go Home!" or "Who Killed Herzog?" (a Brazilian journalist who died in police custody), to Coca Cola bottles and Brazilian bank notes respectively. This might sound trite, but in the context of an authoritarian and brutal military dictatorship that

controlled all state media, stifled the free press, outlawed political opposition, and exiled or tortured dissidents, doing something like this carried serious risk. *Coca Cola Project* even includes diagrammatic instructions for repurposing the bottles as Molotov cocktails.

But the point I want to focus on here is what makes *Coca Cola Project* the more sophisticated of the two qua political art. Whereas *Bank Note Project* simply involved Meireles stamping notes with anti-regime messages before putting them back into circulation himself, *Coca-Cola Project* repurposes Coca Cola’s own recycling mechanisms not only to put the messages into circulation, but to render them visible in the first place. This is because the messages are applied in a white script matching the original Coca-Cola branding and lettering to classic glass Coca-Cola bottles. Almost invisible when the empty bottles are returned for recycling, the messages only become legible once the bottles are refilled with the dark liquid in Coca-Cola’s own bottling plants.

It is not the crude anti-American sentiment, but figuring out how to use Coca-Cola’s own rebottling plants and distribution networks to put this sentiment into circulation, that gives the work its bite. At the time Meireles conceived this work, Brazil was entering the most repressive period of a dictatorship supported by its senior military, the local Catholic Church and the US State Department. In such a context, Coca-Cola shows up not only as an emblem of American consumerism, but of US imperialism. By harnessing Coca-Cola’s own recycling plants to make his anti-regime messages visible, and its distribution networks to put them into circulation, Meireles succeeded not only in eluding state censorship, but in briefly turning a powerful symbol of imperial power—in the spirit of Situationist *détournement*—against itself.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, by bringing its anti-regime subject-matter into alignment, so elegantly, with its principles of production and circulation, the work qualifies as strongly political in my sense—unlike *Bank Note Project*, where there is no such internal alignment between the messages’ content and their means of dissemination.

Like *The Battle of Orgreave* in this respect, *Coca-Cola Project*’s first-order audience is its non-artworld recipients in its immediate local context—even if this audience is much more dispersed and demographically diverse. Also like Deller’s work, it is widely available for second-order artworld consumption at a distance.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, were this *not* true, it would be unclear why such activities should be seen as art as opposed, say, to political activism, community building, or public outreach. Unlike *The Battle of Orgreave*, however, *Coca Cola Project* involves no

<sup>31</sup>See Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A user’s guide to *détournement*,” Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. and expanded edn (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 14–21, <<https://libcom.org/files/Situationist%20International%20Anthology.pdf>>.

<sup>32</sup>In Deller’s case, there is the associated archive, *The Battle of Orgreave (An Injury to One Is an Injury to All)* (2001), acquired for the Tate Collection in 2005, Mike Figgis’s documentary about its making, and *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984–5 Miners’ Strike* (London: Artangel, 1999). In Meireles’s case, this is a result of its inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art’s seminal *Information show* (1970), which secured its reception as a canonical work of global conceptualism, and its subsequent inclusion in innumerable such surveys as a result.

collaboration: Meireles hoped that his “insertions” would give others the courage to disseminate critical messages of their own, but whether or not they did so is unknown. Because the work involves no collaborative dimension, being strongly political clearly cannot be an artefact of collaboration.

The second work I want to consider, more briefly, shows that this can remain true, even when the work in question does involve participants—since participants need not be collaborators. This is true of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra’s highly controversial practice, which has involved, among other things, paying piece-rate wages to unemployed workers to have lines of various lengths indelibly tattooed onto their skin, and to homeless people to sit under cardboard boxes or sleep in confined spaces for the duration of his exhibitions. It has even involved paying addicts with drugs to have lines cut into their hair and, in Berlin, employing asylum seekers who were legally required to refuse payment on pain of being deported under German law. It could hardly be clearer that the primary audience for Sierra’s work is not those who *take part* (and whom it obliges to sell their time, body, and/or labour for subsistence wages), but, rather, those *to whom* the marginal lives of those who do take part are presented in such a way that they can no longer be politely ignored. In doing so, such work makes an easily overlooked local underclass newly visible through artworld structures, and does so precisely by *participating*, provocatively, in their exploitation.

Take the piece *133 People Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond* (2001), made to coincide with the opening of the 2001 Venice Biennale, the artworld’s largest international gathering. For this work Sierra paid the illegal street vendors who scratch out a marginal existence selling counterfeit Gucci handbags and the like on the streets of Venice to have their hair dyed. These vendors come from all over the world, but are often of African descent. The only formal requirement for participation was that the vendors in question have naturally dark hair. Each was paid 120,000 lire (US \$60) to have their hair bleached an incongruous peroxide blond. Doing so caused these vendors, once back on the street, to “pop out” all over a city in which they otherwise tend to fade into the background as so much more “local colour.” Whatever moral reservations one might have about Sierra’s practice—and it is clearly designed to provoke just such moral squeamishness—because the way in which such works are produced participates, provocatively and confrontationally, in the slave wage exploitation to which it thereby draws attention, it comes out as strongly political on my account. And it does so *despite* treating people not as collaborators, but at best as hired hands, and at worst as disposable goods; and being addressed not to these participants themselves, but to the guilty conscience of the well-heeled international audience for contemporary art who would otherwise look straight through them.

It thereby shows that being “strongly political” in my sense is limited neither to collaborative practices, nor to addressing a participant audience. Quite the contrary, in fact: but this can only be seen by proceeding much more slowly than philosophy of art tends to do, on a case-by-case basis. What makes a work

strongly political, it turns out, can vary significantly depending on its nature and its contexts of production or reception.

### IX. CODA

So much for what being strongly political in my sense does and does not imply more generally; what is the upshot for the two claims from which I began? It is this. Deller refuses the epithet “political artist” because the political artist, as this is typically understood, is only weakly political. Weakly political artists claim to tell us how things are politically. Deller not only does not do this, he refuses to do it. At its best, Deller’s art is strongly political; it is permeated by a politics of engaging with others that not only animates its construction from the ground up, but does so in such a way as to reflexively embody its own, strikingly egalitarian, political content. *The Battle of Orgreave* is Deller at his best; it is what Deller calls “wholly political,” which is to say *political through and through*. What this means for other strongly political works by other artists remains to be seen.